

Al Jazeera English launches #HACKED: Syria's Electronic Armies

Al Jazeera English has launched #HACKED, a new interactive mobile web-based app, which takes users deep inside the country's cyber war, a conflict that has proven it can be just as deadly as the ground war.

The project is based on a People & Power documentary of the same name by senior Al Jazeera correspondent, Juliana Ruhfus, but presents the film's investigative journalism in a game format. It is the follow-up to Ruhfus' groundbreaking and award-winning interactive investigation, *Pirate Fishing*, and continues the channel's quest to present its programming content in innovative ways to reach new audiences.



In #HACKED: Syria's Electronic Armies, the user is tasked with collecting as much information as possible in a limited amount of time by contacting activists, hackers and coders - all of whom Ruhfus encountered during the making of the film. Players face a number of decisions, including whether or not they should pay hackers for vital information, when they should go undercover online, and whether they will allow interviewees to disguise their identity to keep them safe. Most crucially, however, the user must investigate without being hacked back. From being tricked into clicking infected links to blackmail attempts, all play hacks are based on real hacks.

In the ever-changing news landscape, there is enormous pressure for journalists to find the best medium for a story and engage with audiences in exciting and challenging new ways. Attracting a younger, mobile generation that increasingly shuns traditional news websites presents a unique challenge. They no longer want to be passive consumers, but expect interaction.

#HACKED: Syria's Electronic Armies can turn passive consumers into active users by confronting them with real choices that result in good or bad outcomes. It reveals the investigative process by re-creating decisions made in the field, while informing and educating the user about complex world issues in an immersive manner.

These are uncharted waters. As Ruhfus says: "While recreating the world of an investigative journalist is natural for me, navigating the rules and ethics of journalism in a game format requires an entirely new skill set."

For Ruhfus, it is essential to ensure that users are constantly reminded that they are dealing with fact and not fiction and that the in-game experience is 100% strict journalism. "Every hack in the app is based on a real hack that has taken place. Texts from hackers have been taken from court documents. The social engineering we use to deceive you in the simulated hacks, how we're creating an avatar that's enticing you to click on something, is exactly what happened during Syria's cyberwar.

"The gamification and interactive elements of projects like #HACKED give the user the experience of being immersed in a news story. Having a specific task to complete often leads them to engage emotionally and intellectually with the topic, while they gain unique perspective on the news story we are presenting through an interactive experience."

Using a combination of original documentary footage, game design and links to outside resources, the interactive app teaches players how to protect themselves from hackers, and get real-time updates on the Syrian War. The experience is a web app that doesn't require downloading and can be played on computers, but is designed specifically for mobile phones where the majority of internet content is now consumed. The technology behind the experience is a platform called Conducttr, which allows multi-channel interactive projects to be collaboratively built quickly and easily.

A preview version of #HACKED: Syria's Electronic Armies was selected for the Alternate Realities Exhibition at Sheffield International Documentary Festival in June this year and nominated for an Alternate Realities Award.

Start your investigation [here](#). Watch the original documentary below:

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